



U.S. Department of Justice

Office of Justice Programs

National Institute of Justice

Washington, D.C. 20531

December 5, 2014

Dear Colleague:

This letter alerts social, behavioral and legal researchers to the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ's) interest in receiving proposals related to criminal courts that can strengthen our knowledge about criminal justice policies and practices for the administration of justice in the United States. NIJ sponsors criminal court research and court-based program evaluation to identify tools, programs and policies that satisfy criminal justice goals, including public safety, cost-efficiency, and fair and equitable treatment of victims and defendants.

NIJ's research focuses on methods for criminal justice administration applicable to diversion, pretrial and other stages of criminal case processing; court-based interventions for offenders and communities; criminal court procedures for judges, prosecutors, defense counsel and juries from arraignment through trial, sentencing and appeals; and forensic and other scientific technologies that support criminal case processing through information sharing, evidence testing and management, and other investigative and trial functions.

NIJ is interested in proposals to study newly evolving topics, as well as opportunities to improve upon prior research in areas that remain relevant to the field. For fiscal year 2015, NIJ's Office of Research and Evaluation has identified the following areas of particular interest:

- **Evaluation of Veterans' Treatment Courts.** As of 2013, more than 200 Veterans' Treatment Courts (VTCs) or dedicated dockets operate in more than 30 states. Veterans are a unique population. It tends to be a population that has few prior offenses, is potentially dangerous, presents mental health issues, and has extensive criminogenic needs. VTCs are distinct from both general adult drug courts and court dockets that manage cases involving offenders with former military service. It is not known whether VTCs produce better outcomes or reduce recidivism. Program fidelity is difficult to assess because a VTC program model has not been confirmed by objective, multisite evaluations or by research that identifies and examines factors that influence outcomes. One distinguishing characteristic is a mentoring component; but because VTCs have their base in grassroots efforts and have been developed according to community needs and resources, they have interesting variations and inconsistent program designs across the country. Objective and multisite research may reveal how VTC outcomes compare with other court options and provide more solid evidence for the debate on specialized programs for veterans.
- **Alternatives to incarceration.** See the Dear Colleague Letter for Corrections for additional information on alternatives to incarceration. It is available at NIJ.gov, keywords "Dear Colleague Corrections."

- **Social science research on indigent defense.** The Supreme Court has recognized the right to defense counsel in most criminal proceedings but has not mandated how the states implement the provision of defense counsel. Hence, indigent defense policies and practices vary widely in the United States. NIJ has several current projects related to indigent defense, but more research is needed. The topics identified below demonstrate areas where NIJ would like to focus researcher attention:
 - Research on the causes and consequences of the waiver of counsel for adults. What factors influence an offender’s decision to waive counsel in adult court (e.g. fees, pretrial detention, application process and plea bargain offers)? Indigent adults face challenges in access to counsel across this country. These challenges can include being deemed ineligible to receive indigent defense services, the assessment of fees once counsel is appointed, and administrative processes and policies that may discourage defendants from exercising their right to counsel. NIJ seeks research to examine which, if any, procedural policies and practices may have a chilling effect on the exercise of an adult defendant’s Sixth Amendment right to defense counsel.
 - Research on the causes and consequences of the waiver of counsel for juveniles. In addition to examining the impacts of waiver on juvenile justice system resources (e.g., the proportion of represented and unrepresented juveniles who remain in detention after initial hearings), NIJ seeks research to examine the long-term consequences of juvenile waiver. For example, how does waiver of the right to counsel affect a juvenile’s experience in being placed out of home, recidivism and the likelihood of later engaging in criminal behavior as an adult; and in what way, if any, does this experience vary for juveniles across different jurisdictions?
 - Research on understanding and improving the contract/panel attorney systems.
 - Defense counsel operational research, such as client notification systems and uses of motions.

Other topics of research on courts are valuable as well. NIJ is interested in building sound, evidence-based knowledge of interventions and programs that work and can be tested in a variety of institutions under varied circumstances.

Search past awards for examples of related current and completed projects on NIJ.gov, keywords “past awards.”

Interested prospective applicants are highly encouraged to consult with relevant project officers prior to submitting a proposal. In the case of criminal courts, Dr. Linda Truitt at linda.truitt@usdoj.gov and Dr. Nadine Frederique at nadine.frederique@usdoj.gov are the appropriate project officers.

This is not a special competition or a new program. Proposals in response to this Dear Colleague Letter must meet the requirements and deadlines of the solicitation for which they are submitted.

The appropriate vehicle for responding to topics covered in this letter will be NIJ’s “Research and Evaluation on Justice Systems” solicitation. To receive an e-mail when NIJ issues a

solicitation, subscribe to NIJ.gov. You also can follow us on Twitter (twitter.com/OJPNIJ) and Facebook (facebook.com/OJPNIJ).

The “Research and Evaluation on Justice Systems” solicitation should be available on the NIJ website in early 2015.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. Sabol', written in a cursive style.

William J. Sabol, Ph.D.
Acting Director
National Institute of Justice